

# Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

## German Military Rule in Belgium

### *Extracts from a Dispatch from U.S. Ambassador Brand Whitlock to the Secretary of State*

I have had it in mind, and I might say, on my conscience, since the Germans began to deport Belgian workmen early in November of 1916, to prepare for the Department a detailed report on this latest instance of brutality, but there have been so many obstacles in the way of obtaining evidence on which a calm and judicious opinion could be based, and one is so overwhelmed with the horror of the thing itself, that it has been, and even now is, difficult to write calmly and justly about it. . . .

The deportations began in October in the *etape*, at Ghent and at Bruges. . . .

Their seizures in Brussels were made evidently with much greater care than in the provinces, with more regard for the appearances. There was no public announcement of the intention to deport, but suddenly certain men in towns whose names were on the list of *chomeurs* received summonses notifying them to report at one of the railway stations on a given day and penalties were fixed for failure to respond to the summons, and there was printed on the card an offer of employment by the German Government, either in Germany or Belgium. . . .

The Commission for Relief in Belgium had secured permission to give to each deported man a loaf of bread, and some of the communes provided warm clothing for those who had none, and in addition a small financial allowance. . . .

The rage, the terror, and despair excited by this measure all over Belgium were beyond anything we had witnessed since the day the Germans poured into Brussels. The delegates of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, returning to Brussels, told the most distressing stories of the scenes of cruelty and sorrow attending the seizures. And daily, hourly, almost, since that time, appalling stories have been related by Belgians coming to the legation. . . .

Transportation everywhere in Belgium is difficult, the vicinal railways scarcely operating anymore because of the lack of oil, while all the horses have been taken. The people who are forced to go from one village to another must do so on foot or in vans drawn by the few miserable horses that are left. The wagons of the breweries, the one institution that the Germans have scrupulously respected, are hauled by oxen.

The well-known tendency of sensational reports to exaggerate themselves, especially in time of war, and in a situation like that existing here, with no newspapers to serve as a daily clearing house for all the rumours that are as avidly believed as they are eagerly repeated, should, of course, be considered, but even if a modicum of all that is told is true, there still remains enough to stamp this deed as one of the foulest that history records.

I am constantly in receipt of reports from all over Belgium that tend to bear out the stories one constantly hears of brutality and cruelty. A number of men sent back to Mons were in a dying condition, many of them tubercular. At Malines and at Antwerp returned men died, their friends asserting that they had been victims of neglect and cruelty, of cold, of exposure, of hunger.

I have had requests from the Burgomasters of ten communes from La Louviere, asking that permission be obtained to send to the deported men in Germany packages of food similar to those that are being sent to prisoners of war. Thus far the German authorities have refused to permit this except in special instances, and returning Belgians claim that even when such packages are received they are used by the camp authorities only as another means of coercing them to sign the agreements to work.

It is said that in spite of the liberal salary promised those who would sign voluntarily no money has as yet been received in Belgium from workmen in Germany. . . .

Source: *Records of the Great War*, Vol. IV, ed. Charles F. Horne, National Alumni 1923

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